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ART. X.—*Progress and Limits of Social Improvement.*

Principi di Scienza Nuova di Giambattista Vico d'intorno alla comune Natura delle Nazioni colla vita dell' Autore scritto da lui medesimo. Edizione sesta. 3 vol. 8vo. Milano. 1816.

The New Science; or a Treatise on the Principles that regulate the Origin, Progress and Decline of Nations. By J. B. VICO, with a *Life of the Author*, written by *Himself*.

THE enquiry into the laws that regulate the progress, and determine the limits of the improvement of society,—which has become of late familiar to the public mind,—was not much agitated in the ancient schools of philosophy. It is chiefly, in fact, within the last half century that the speculations on this subject have begun to assume the form of definite theories. At the opening of the French Revolution, when the whole Christian world was in eager expectation of some great results that were to follow from this political movement, the boldest and most ardent thinkers started the idea, that a complete reform in the institutions of society would bring about the entire abolition of moral and physical evil in all their forms, and convert the earth into a paradise of perfect innocence and happiness, where we should flourish forever in immortal youth, without, of course, any wish or necessity of a better state hereafter. This system has been popularly called the theory of the perfectibility of man, and is not to be confounded with the sounder notions which encourage us to believe in the possibility of great improvements in the condition of particular individuals and societies, but always within moderate and reasonable limits. The partisans of this extravagant scheme were not undeceived by the fatal reverses, that so soon overclouded the fair promise of that memorable period. The oceans of innocent blood, that deluged the streets of Paris for five years, could not quench the fiery faith with which these enthusiastic souls adhered to their delusive visions of ideal perfection. It was in the dungeons of Robespierre,—from which he only escaped to die by the effects of poison, administered by his own hand, as the only

resource against a more ignominious fate,—that Condorcet, the apostle of this school, composed his essay on the progress of the human mind. At the same time, when this doctrine was in full vogue in France, it also obtained a temporary currency in England, and may be found, set forth in full relief, in the Political Justice of Godwin ;—a work, which, strange as it may seem, was received with general enthusiasm by the reading public. The strong good sense of the mass of the people, enlightened by the practical refutation of these extravagant theories afforded by the progress of the French Revolution, pretty soon dissipated this delusion, which, as the opinion of a party, may now be said to be extinct.

An attempt has indeed been lately made to revive the system, and even to use it as the basis of a practical reform of the institutions of society, by two or three individuals, who, after failing to realize their hopes at home, condescended to make our country the theatre of their benevolent exertions. We allude to Mr. Owen, and his female associate, Miss Wright. The small success which they met with in this quarter, renders it superfluous to dwell at length on the particular form in which they manifested their opinions. Mr. Owen, with whom we had some slight personal acquaintance soon after his arrival in this country, said at that time that he was quite certain of being able, within five years, to reorganize after his own fashion, or in one word, to *Owenize* our whole vast Republic. More than eight years have since elapsed, and the single, and not very flourishing establishment at New Harmony, is thus far the only result of his labors. Indeed, this great reformer has since returned to his own country, in no very pleasant disposition towards us, affirming publicly, that we are incapable of self-government, and, of course, unworthy to be governed by him ; while it appears, that his fellow-laborer,—after much lecturing against the old-fashioned system of matrimony,—has lately condescended to change her name ;—no doubt on the principle of Benedict in the play, that when she lectured on the advantages to women of dispensing with husbands, she did not think that she should live to be herself a wife.

The same general tendency of opinion and feeling, which gave rise to the theory of perfectibility in France, displayed itself in Germany, under a somewhat more scientific,—perhaps we may say more plausible form,—although the leading

characteristics of the German system are substantially the same with those of the French one. The friends of letters and humanity will always be forward in acknowledging their obligations to the Germans, as well for their earnest and persevering efforts in the reformation of religion and the restoration of classical learning, as for much of the best fruit that has been gathered within the last half century from almost every field in the vast domains of science. Nor can we be justly said to underrate their high deserts, when we add, that individuals, and even considerable classes of writers, belonging to this illustrious and excellent nation, to which we of Saxon stock look with pride and pleasure as our parent, have at different periods and particularly within the one just mentioned, indulged in wild speculations on many important points in metaphysical and moral philosophy. Perceiving however, or thinking they perceived, about the period of the opening of the French Revolution, a strong tendency towards an improvement of the condition of society in Europe, and wishing to connect this encouraging fact with the general course of the history of man, the German writers persuaded themselves that the species, like the individual, naturally goes through a process of education, by which it is gradually moulded, fashioned and perfected, so as to pass from a very rude original state through a long course of intermediate changes into one of indefinite purity and excellence. On this system, the generations that immediately followed the deluge, were the infants of our kind; the Greeks and Romans, and the other various nations that occupy the middle period of history were in a state of adolescence; towards the close of the last century, the human race began to approach maturity, and it was supposed that by the beginning of the next millennium, at the year 2000, they would have made such farther progress as to exhibit our nature in something like a state of perfection.

Such was, in substance, the theory proposed by the Germans, and which is particularly developed with a good deal of eloquence and plausibility by Herder, in his *Philosophy of the History of Man*, a work in its time of great celebrity and influence.* The system retains many partisans among the

* The opinion of Herder was not embraced by all his friends of the Weimar school. Schiller, for example, has condensed the substance of a much more reasonable doctrine into a single couplet.

*Der Mensch wird alt und der Mensch wird jung,
Die Welt hat nimmer Verbesserung.*

less clear-headed and more enthusiastic of his countrymen, with whom the education of the human race still forms a favorite subject of declamation and reasoning. The theory is obviously nothing more than the French system of perfectibility in a somewhat different shape; and as the Germans borrowed from the French the leading notions which they thus accommodated in this fashion to their own taste,—so the French, on the other hand, having become tired of their own invention in its original form, have latterly shown some disposition to give it currency again, under the costume which it assumed on the eastern side of the Rhine. Professor Cousin, the most popular and eloquent French philosopher of the present day, bestows in his lectures a large eulogium on the work of Herder, and seems to adopt, under some modifications of his own, the leading points of the theory. His opinions, as far as they are peculiar to himself, are of too abstract and mystical a character to be here noticed. The system, under its German guise, has even found adherents and apostles on this side of the ocean. Some of our ablest and most eloquent writers have descanted with much enthusiasm and evident conviction on the indefinitely progressive character of our nature, without appearing to be conscious, that they were only commenting on the text of the Political Justice and the Age of Reason.

It is the natural tendency of extreme opinions to generate each other. An excess in one direction almost always leads, by the effect of reaction, to an excess in the opposite one; and this result in fact happened in the present instance. Struck with the absurdity of the theories of social improvement, to which we have alluded,—alarmed at some of their practical consequences,—and anxious to refute them, if possible, in a perfectly intelligible and positive way,—a school of philosophers arose in England, who denied the possibility of any improvement at all. It was declared to be impracticable, not merely that the human race should arrive on this sublunary sphere at a state of faultless perfection, but that France, Great Britain, the United States, or any other community should make any considerable advances beyond the precise point at which it stood in the year 1798; when, if we recollect rightly, the work of Malthus, the founder of this school, was published. This writer affirmed that all improvement would necessarily be attended with an increase of population.

and that all increase of population was necessarily greater than the corresponding increase in the quantity of food required for its support could possibly be made. Hence all improvement carries with it a bane just powerful enough to neutralise the good principle to which it was owing, and to bring matters back exactly to their former state. In proportion as communities advance in civilization, they begin to fall short of provisions, and if they could possibly arrive at a state of perfection, they would be obliged, like the crew of a ship at sea in distress, to feed upon each other,—a result which, as Malthus rightly suggests, is not quite consistent with a state of entire innocence and happiness.

In reply to this argument, the partisans of the system of absolute perfectibility might, perhaps, pertinently enquire, how it appears, that man, in a state of complete perfection, whether in this or any other sphere, would retain his ancient senses and appetites. If we go the length of supposing that this mortal is to put on immortality here below, why not also suppose, that it may throw off at the same time the inclination and necessity for the gross aliments by which it is now sustained, and learn to subsist on an exclusively intellectual and substantial diet? Others again might have enquired how it happened, that this principle, which was to prevent all future improvement in all parts of the world, had formed no obstacle to the past; and why the multifarious movement of society, whether advancing, oblique or retrograde, which had been going on so busily for thousands of years, was to be arrested forever, precisely two years before the close of the eighteenth century. Such, however, is the celebrated system of Malthus, which, though passing out of vogue, like the other extreme doctrine which it was intended to refute, still has its partisans on both sides of the water, is vigorously maintained by some of the leading journals, particularly the *Edinburgh Review*,—and is considered by its partisans as forming a new era in the science of Political Economy.

If, however, we reject this system as not less irrational than the one it was meant to supersede, we shall still be at no loss to find reasons for refusing our assent to the doctrine of absolute perfectibility. The slightest observation of the universe to which we belong shows us, in fact, that one of its elements is a principle of evil, moral and physical, which has exhibited itself to a greater or less extent and under various modifications

from the creation of the world up to the present day, and which evidently could not be eradicated while the system remains what it is. If men became angels, they would necessarily cease to be men ; but when we enquire into the laws and limits of improvement, we mean to ask, what men are capable of becoming, without ceasing to be substantially what they are. History, the grand record of experiments in moral and political philosophy, refutes the doctrine on every page. We find no traces either of a regular improvement in the condition of the whole race, during the period of which we possess a historical account, or of any of the transition states through which, according to this theory, men have passed, from that of monkeys, or as some say, reptiles, into their present condition, in the course of that progress which is to elevate them ultimately into saints and seraphs. On this point we have the authority of Dr. Johnson, in his reply to Lord Monboddo, a Scotch partisan of these notions, who maintained that men were an improved race of monkeys, whose tails, originally long, had gradually shortened, and finally dwindled into nothing by the constant use of clothing. ‘Show me,’ said the Doctor, ‘a single man who has the smallest remnant of a tail, though it be but an inch long, and I am a convert to the theory. Till then, allow me to believe the Bible, which assures us, that God created man, not in the form of a monkey or a reptile, but in his own image ; and that it was not, as Helvetius affirms, an accidental twist of his thumb while in the monkey state, but the inspiration of the Almighty that gave him understanding.’ In fact, Religion directly contradicts this theory. It not only teaches us, as has been just intimated, that we were created with substantially the same faculties which we now possess, and with a mixed moral nature, prone alternately to good and evil, but it further teaches us, that this mixture of good and evil is the permanent and unalterable law of our condition in this world ;—that the very purpose of our existence here, as moral beings, is to work out, within the sphere of our own activity, the triumph of good over evil, which we of course could not do, if evil did not exist ; and that the degree of fidelity with which we execute this purpose will determine our condition in a future state of being. When we suppose the possibility of perfection in this world, we abandon the hope of a better,—shut out from our intellectual vision the bright and glorious views that Religion opens to us of our origin, nature

and destiny,—and in short, throw ourselves headlong into the black and bottomless gulf of Atheism, which, we know, swallowed up all the adherents of this system in France.

While we reject, without hesitation, a doctrine pregnant with such absurdities, and pointing to such conclusions, we still maintain, that there is in our nature a capacity for improvement within certain limits and under certain conditions. Although the whole human race appear to be formed after a common type, the essential characteristics of which will never be altered,—although men never have been monkeys, and in their present state of being never will be angels,—although the differences between the principal varieties of our species,—intellectually and morally viewed,—are, perhaps, less important than we are at first thought disposed to consider them,—it is nevertheless certain, that such varieties exist. Men, when examined at different times and places, and under different circumstances, exhibit very different intellectual, moral, and even physical characteristics. The several communities that inhabit the globe at the same periods, differ materially from each other in many important particulars. It is impossible for the utmost stretch of liberality to place the New Hollanders and the Hottentots on a level with the Frenchmen or the Englishmen of the present day,—to confound the subject of the Celestial Empire with the citizen of the United States. The same communities again exhibit, at different periods, as great a variety of characteristics as different communities at the same periods. Cities, that have figured as the seats of empire and luxury, dwindle into nameless heaps of ruins. Whole regions that have been at one time abodes of civilization, wealth and happiness, are given up to universal desolation at another. Compare the England of our time with the England of the Heptarchy or the Roman conquest. Compare the wealth,—the arts,—the luxury,—the high cultivation,—the dense population, that have rendered a little island one of the leading powers of the world, with the rude condition of the few scanty and half-naked savages, that shuddered under the shadow of their sombre forests at the incantations of the Druids. Look at Sicily as she was two thousand years ago, feeding from her abundant stores her own population of twelve millions, and at the same time exporting provisions to such an extent, as to be styled the granary of the Roman Empire. Compare her with the Sicily of the present

day, exporting nothing, and hardly sustaining a wretched remnant of less than half a million inhabitants. Look at Greece in the age of her greatness and glory,—glowing with life and genius,—swarming with inhabitants,—every hill crowned with a fortress or a temple,—every valley teeming with the richest fruits,—every grove vocal with the sweetest strains of music and poetry,—every sea covered with her canvass,—every climate filled with her renown,—first repulsing, and then overturning the giant power of the Persian despotism,—in short, subjugating,—civilizing,—charming the known world of her day :—and then look at her as we see her now,—aptly described by the illustrious poet, who devoted his pen and his life to her service, as the cold and lifeless corpse of what she was,—bereft of every thing, except the inalienable treasure of her fine climate, and trembling but lately in her abject degradation at the nod of the chief of the black eunuchs of the Seraglio of Constantinople. Egypt, the wonder and glory of a still earlier period, has relapsed into a sand-bank, while Holland has risen from the same condition of a sand-bank, covered with alluvial earth, to be, as it were, the Egypt of the modern world. Rome herself, so long, and in such various ways the metropolis of Europe,—Rome, after swaying successively, through a career of more than two thousand years, the sceptre of military power,—law,—luxury,—civilization,—art,—and finally religion, is rapidly passing to the same gulf of ruin and complete oblivion that has swallowed up her predecessors ; while a new Rome is rising with rapidity in our own day, on the banks of a river which the universal geography of the former did not even include, and promises, at no distant period, to realize a dominion even more extensive and durable than that of the Eternal City. The most superficial observation of the state of the world and the course of history proves, in short, that the condition of man, whether viewed in his individual or social capacity, though not subject to a law of regular progress, is nevertheless not determined, like that of the lower animals, by a fixed and unalterable standard, but varies very much at different times and places, and that the modern theories, which deny the possibility of any improvement, are not less incorrect than those which affirm that it can be carried to the point of absolute perfection.

If, then, we dismiss from our attention both these extreme systems,—if we recognise, on the one hand, the practicabili-

ty of the advancement of civilization, and admit, on the other, that there are limits, which it never can transcend,—the interesting question naturally presents itself, *What are the principles which regulate this progress, and determine these limits?*

The law on this subject, suggested by the analogy of nature, and confirmed by all experience, appears to be this. The essential characteristics of human nature will always remain the same, but individual men and individual communities are susceptible of improvement or degradation, according to the circumstances in which they are placed, and the comparative vigor of their own exertions in turning them to account. If we look at the communities that fall within our own observation, with reference to their moral, intellectual and physical condition,—every particular, in short, which constitutes what we call civilization,—we find in each a common standard which is, as it were, an average of the condition of all the members, and to which that of the great majority of them in point of fact very nearly approaches; and we also find a certain number of individuals and families towering above or dropping below this standard, and exhibiting talents and virtues on the one hand, or weaknesses and vices on the other, which distinguish them completely, though in different degrees, from the rest. The same phenomenon presents itself to us, when we extend our observation so as to take in at once the whole compass of history. Nations,—races are the individuals and families that make up the vast society of man;—and as we notice in each particular community a common standard of civilization, and a certain number of individuals and families that rise above or fall below it, so in tracing the character of our race from its origin up to the present day, we observe in like manner a common standard of humanity,—if we may so speak,—which is the average of the condition of the various communities that have successively flourished in the different quarters of the globe, and to which the great majority of these communities make, in fact, a very near approach: and we also observe a number of particular communities rising above or falling below this common standard,—in one case living out feebly and obscurely the term of their existence, and then sinking into complete oblivion,—in the other, exercising a powerful influence over their contemporaries, and leaving a luminous track in the annals of the world.

Such then appears to be the law. The nature of man will ever be substantially the same. The condition of individuals, whether men or communities, is variable : depending partly on the will of Providence, which places them in a more or less favorable condition for progress and improvement, but still more, perhaps, on the fidelity with which they respectively take advantage of the talents committed to their trust. The degree to which this improvement or this degradation may be carried, may be said to be indefinite, not because there are no limits to it, but because it is impossible to say beforehand what these limits are. We cannot affirm with certainty that no individual will ever be greater or better than the greatest or best man that has yet appeared, or more abject and vicious than the worst. In our own times, and within our own country, we have seen the standard of individual character raised to a height which it never reached before, in the person of Washington. But who will undertake to affirm, that virtues still more pure and glorious than those which distinguished the illustrious and beloved Father of our country, are absolutely unattainable? In like manner every enquirer, in casting his eyes over the long roll of history, would probably fasten them upon some one nation which, in his opinion, was fairly entitled to claim a preëminence over the rest. The magnificence of Egypt,—the piety of Judea,—the taste of Greece,—the virtue of Rome,—the stability of China,—the science and art of modern Europe,—the pure freedom of our own country, would in turn engage his attention, and according to his peculiar habits of thought might determine his preference. But he would exhibit more weakness and prejudice than sound philosophy, who should undertake to affirm that no nation can possibly exist hereafter, which shall exhibit his favorite qualities in higher perfection, and with less alloy than any of these.

But though the capacity for improvement may justly be said to be indefinite, it is far from being infinite. It is obviously limited, as we have already remarked, by the laws of our physical and moral constitution ; and experience shows, that the actual progress in improvement of individuals and nations has no tendency to exempt them,—still less the whole race to which they belong,—from the operation of these laws, or to confer upon them powers and privileges, which Providence in this our state of probation has denied us. The best and greatest man that ever appeared has, we need not say, no more chance of

arriving at immortality and perfection, on this side of the grave, than the worst. The mightiest and the weakest nations pursue alike the common course of progress, maturity, decline and fall. If merit could have secured its possessor from the lot of humanity, would our Washington have slept with his fathers on the banks of the Potomac? If religion, virtue, taste, courage, art, science,—all the finest and noblest qualities that adorn the character of nations,—afforded security against the mutability that is attached to every thing earthly, would Egypt, Judea, Greece, Rome, and so many other illustrious communities of ancient and modern days, have disappeared in succession from the theatres on which they flourished? Indeed, the highest attainments of individuals or communities, far from serving as a point of departure for a subsequent progressive advancement of the whole human race towards perfection, are much more frequently,—we may rather say universally, for such appears to be the general law,—the precursors of their own regular and rapid decline. The individual continues to advance until he arrives at the maturity of his nature; but no sooner has he reached this point, than the germ of decay begins to display itself. No matter how superior his qualities, how noble the use he makes of them:—let him be as great as Napoleon,—as wise and good as Aurelius or Socrates,—it makes no difference; he must go the way of all flesh,---dust returns to dust,---and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Families, that at one time produce great characters, are very soon exhausted by their own fertility. It is much if a name continues illustrious for two generations, after which the glory of the ancestor only serves in general to exhibit more conspicuously the nothingness, if not the infamy of his degenerate progeny. Do we find the descendants of Warwick and Marlborough leading on the British armies to victory, or those of Bacon, Boyle, Bolingbroke, or Oxford preëminent in Council or in Parliament? The glories of Pitt the father, and Pitt the son, are inherited by,—we know not whom,---probably some active and enterprising fox-hunter; and the next generation of that far-famed race, which in our day peopled the thrones of Continental Europe, will be,—we say it not to their disparagement, they will probably be much better, though not greater men, than their progenitors,---a very quiet company of attorneys, ornithologists, and plain country gentlemen.

In like manner in the history of nations, their most brilliant epochs have generally preceded, by a very short interval, their decay and ruin. The reign of Sesostriis, the culminating point of the greatness of Egypt, was succeeded very shortly by the Persian conquest. David and Solomon had scarcely closed their illustrious career in Judea, when the kingdom was first rent in twain by domestic dissensions, and then subjugated by a foreign invader. Pericles, who has given his name to the brightest period in the history of Athens, witnessed himself the first three years of that wasting Peloponnesian war, which destroyed the prosperity of all Greece. The barbarian invasion and the dark ages, as they are emphatically called, tread upon the heels of the Augustan epoch; and the decline of France, notwithstanding the transitory splendor of the reign of Napoleon, will probably be dated hereafter from the close of the age of Lewis XIV. It was accordingly affirmed by Rousseau, an acute and profound, though sometimes mistaken reasoner on political events and principles, that no nation of modern Europe was likely to make any considerable advances in greatness and glory after the time when he was writing, for the reason that each had already reached and passed its brilliant period. The assertion has received a remarkable confirmation, both positive and negative. Of the Western nations to which he alluded, and which had then, or before, reached their brilliant periods, none, with the exception perhaps of Great Britain, has since obtained, or is likely to obtain hereafter, a permanent accession of power; while Russia, which was not included in his list, and which has not yet reached her period of brilliancy, has acquired, within the last fifty years,—as we have already had occasion to remark,—a prodigious accession of influence, and is rapidly pressing forward towards a complete and decided preponderance over all the rest.

It would not perhaps be difficult to show, why this is so; why the germs of evil, inherent in our nature, are warmed into life and activity by the same general causes that develope the principles of good; and why the progress of nations, like that of individuals, is naturally arrested at a certain point of maturity, from which they afterwards fall by a regular decline.* But the subject belongs

* It is remarkable that so little has been written directly upon this question, which is, perhaps, the most interesting in political philosophy. Our libraries are overrun with works upon the manner in which

to another order of enquiries, and is foreign to our present purpose, which is rather to state and illustrate the fact.

Nations and races therefore pass like individuals through their periods of progress, maturity and decline, and the attainment by any one of the highest degrees of civilization that have yet been witnessed, instead of serving as an introduction to a new series of advances, is in general the precursor of approaching decay. It is evident, therefore, that no one race or nation can ever carry forward the work of improvement beyond a certain point, or extend its influence so as to change the character of the race.

But admitting this, it is sometimes suggested, that there is a regular progress of humanity kept up through a succession of races and nations, each of which inherits the acquisitions of those which preceded, and transmits them in turn with additions to those that follow, and that the sum of civilization is thus always increasing, and may continue to increase to an indefinite extent. The Asiatic, for example, takes up the line of the great 'march of intellect' where it was left by the African, and the European, in turn, where it was left by the Asiatic; so that the result is the same, as if each or all of them had carried it forward in a uniform course, up to the same point which it reached in the hands of the last.

nations *ought* to be governed; but there are scarcely any upon the principles that *in fact* regulate their progress, and determine their condition, including the forms of their governments, at the different periods of their history. The work of Vico, which we have placed at the head of this article, is the only one of much importance upon this subject, and in this the author has done little more than propose the problem,—his own solution being far from complete or satisfactory. The principal merit of his book lies, in fact, in the title, which proves that Vico had distinctly conceived the original and important idea, that the circumstances which regulate the origin, progress and decline of nations are susceptible of generalization, and may be stated and classed as a separate branch of philosophy. In his attempt to do this, Vico failed, and the principles of the *New Science* are still to be discovered. Vico has been called in Italy the *Dante of Philosophy*. He was a bold and original, though not a very correct thinker. The effect and reputation of his work were destroyed by the confused, obscure, and cumbrous style in which it is written. Montesquieu, with whom he was contemporary, borrowed a good deal from him without acknowledgment. The public attention has lately been attracted to his work, by the praise which Cousin has bestowed upon it; and one of the pupils of that Professor, M. Michelet, has published a translation, or rather abstract, which, however, is nearly as illegible as the original.

But this view of the subject, though somewhat more plausible in theory, is not more conformable to fact and experience than the other. The character and condition of each particular nation are the results, as we have already remarked, of the common principles of our nature, developing themselves in particular forms, according to the particular circumstances that affect their operation. One of these circumstances is undoubtedly the influence of other nations, whether preceding or contemporary, and this may be of any degree of importance, according to the extent of the relation through which it is exercised. Sometimes it is almost null. Whole races,—the Asiatic for example,—have passed through their periods of progress, maturity and decline, without having their civilization modified in any degree by this cause. In other cases, again, the effect of foreign influence is evidently considerable; but even in these, it is far from being true, that there is a regular superiority in the nation which follows over that which preceded, and in some degree formed it. The influence of the former is one of the elements that determine the character of the latter, but this character, in the general result, is neither superior nor inferior to the other. It is rather something *sui generis*,—and entirely different. In Greece, for instance, the impulse to improvement was given by colonies from Egypt, and the influence of these colonies no doubt affected, in a considerable degree, the progress of society in the former country. Greece, therefore, may be said to have inherited the wisdom of Egypt, and on the view of the subject which we are considering, the result should have been that Greece should have taken up the work of improvement at the point where it was left by the Egyptians, pursued the same course, and excelled them in their own way. What in fact happened? The form of civilization in Greece was not only different from that which existed in Egypt, but in most respects precisely the reverse. The Egyptians were religious; the Greeks philosophical. In their system of government, the Egyptians aimed at stability and order; the Greeks sacrificed every thing to an enthusiastic love of individual liberty. The style of art in Egypt was grand, massive, colossal; in Greece light, airy and elegant. We cannot say, that either nation was on the whole superior or inferior to the other. Each would be preferred by particular persons according to their particular tastes and habits, and each was superior in its own way.

The Jews again inherited, under different circumstances, this same wisdom of Egypt, and formed themselves upon it. The civilization of Judea was cradled in an ark of bulrushes on the banks of the Nile. On the system we are considering, the daughter of Zion, in her mature beauty, should have exhibited at once the imposing majesty of her parent, and the wild and native graces of her younger sister, the charming wood-nymph of Hellas. What in fact happened? She bore no resemblance either to one or to the other. We may say, that the civilization of the Jews was superior to that of the Egyptians, because they excelled the latter precisely in the quality that forms the highest distinction of our nature, that is Piety; but the two things are not, after all, susceptible of comparison. They are essentially different. The temple of Solomon was, perhaps, inferior in grandeur to those of Carnac and Luxore; but the lyre of David sent forth strains that were never heard within the cloisters of the priestly aristocracy of Memphis.

The Saracens, a modern nation, inherited and formed themselves upon the whole learning of the ancient world. Their sacred writings are a compilation from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: their philosophy and art were borrowed from the Greeks. Is the Koran, then, an improvement upon the Bible? Did Averroes carry intellectual philosophy beyond the point where it was left by Aristotle? Is Sinbad the Sailor a better poem than the Odyssey? Did Bagdad and Cordova, at their brilliant periods, flourishing in all the pomp of oriental luxury,—marble halls,—flowing fountains,—orange groves,—trelliced arbors,—bear much resemblance to Jerusalem, Rome or Athens? Was the civilization of the Saracens superior, inferior, or equal to that of the ancient world, or was it not rather something entirely different, having merits and defects of its own, and admitting, in reality, no precise comparison with that of any other people?

Finally, we see in the modern world of our own time a new formation out of the same materials, which were employed by the Saracens. We inherit like them, and with their additions,—whatever they may have been,—the wisdom of Egypt, Greece, and Palestine. On the doctrine we are considering, it would be difficult to say, what the result ought to be; for we should have been obliged to surpass, each in its own way, three or four nations, whose respective forms of civilization were all different.

This was obviously impossible ; but if we could not excel them all at once, each in its own way, we might at least have selected some one of our masters, whose peculiar characteristics we might have copied and carried to higher perfection. **Has** this in fact happened? Quite the contrary. The civilization of the modern world is another new creation, entirely different from that of any of the ancient nations, whose acquisitions we inherit. We are neither superior nor inferior to them ; they were neither superior nor inferior to us. They excelled us in certain particulars, each in its own way : we excel them in others. The Egyptians surpassed us in the grandeur of their public monuments ;—the Hebrews in piety ;—the Greeks in taste ;—the Romans in virtue ;—even the Saracens in a sort of wild magnificence. We excel them all in the physical sciences, and their application to the arts. There lies our peculiar glory ; and it may serve to moderate the pride which we are sometimes inclined to feel in our supposed general superiority, to recollect, that the ancients had the advantage of us in most of the attainments belonging to our moral and higher nature, and that it is principally in the lower order of mechanical and purely material enquiries that we excel them. In making this remark, we leave out of view the modern improvements in political science, from which we expect great results, but of which the value is not yet fully ascertained.

We find, in short, no appearance in the history of the world, of a law, by which each successive nation or race takes up the work of improvement at the point where it was left by preceding ones, and after carrying it on during the period of its own existence, delivers it over in a more advanced state to its successors. On the contrary, the fortunes and characters of particular nations rather seem to be, when the term is properly explained, the results of accident. The development of civilization is accordingly described by a late English poet, Mrs. Barbauld, as the effect of the presence of a capricious Genius, who, without any moving cause, but his own accidental preference, fixes his residence alternately in different quarters of the globe.

‘ There walks a spirit o’er the peopled earth ;
Secret his progress is, unknown his birth ;
Moody and viewless as the changing wind,
No force arrests his foot, no chain can bind.
Where’er he turns, the human brute awakes,
And roused to better life, his sordid hut forsakes :

He thinks, he reasons, glows with purer fires,
Feels finer wants, and burns with new desires.
Obedient nature follows where he leads,—
The steaming marsh is changed to fruitful meads ;
Then from its bed is drawn the ponderous ore ;
Then commerce pours her gifts on every shore ;
Then kindles fancy, then expands the heart,
Then blow the flowers of genius and of art ;
Saints, heroes, sages, who the land adorn,
Seem rather to descend, than to be born ;
Whilst history, midst the rolls consigned to fame,
With pen of adamant inscribes their name.

The Genius now forsakes the favored shore,
And hates, capricious, what he loved before.
Then empires fall to dust, then arts decay,
And wasted realms enfeebled despots sway.
Even nature's changed; without his fostering smile,
Ophir no gold, no plenty yields the Nile ;
The thirsty sand absorbs the useless rill,
And spotted plagues from putrid fens distil.
In desert solitudes then Tadmor sleeps ;
Stern Marius then o'er fallen Carthage weeps ;
Then with enthusiast love the pilgrim roves
To seek his footsteps, in forsaken groves,
Explores the fractured arch, the ruined tower,
Those limbs disjointed of gigantic power ;
Still at each step he dreads the adder's sting,
The Arab's javelin, or the tiger's spring ;
With doubtful caution treads the echoing ground,
And asks where Troy and Babylon are found.'

The facts, which Mrs. Barbauld describes as the consequences of the caprice of the Genius of Civilization, and which may be fairly represented, according to the common use of language, as the effects of accident, are in reality, we hardly need say, results of the will of Providence, determining the circumstances in which men and nations are placed, and of the will of man, so far as he is left free, exercising a spontaneous action upon these circumstances, and modifying their results.

Such appears to be the law which regulates the progress, and determines the limits of the improvement of society. The essential characteristics of the race will always remain the same. The condition of individuals and communities is variable and susceptible of improvement or degradation,

within certain limits assigned by the moral and physical laws of our nature. In briefly recapitulating the different views that have been taken of this subject, we have incidentally alluded to some of the more remarkable historical examples which tend to illustrate it, and to substantiate the conclusions we have drawn. A more complete and systematic survey of the field of history would probably afford new evidence of their truth. When we contemplate, at one view, the succession of nations and races, whose records fill up the annals of the world, and endeavor to ascertain the relations in which each has stood to those which preceded, accompanied, and followed it in the order of time, far from perceiving the existence of a law of progress, by the effect of which every generation regularly surpasses the preceding one, and is surpassed, in turn, by that which follows it, we find, on the contrary, that the common principles of our nature develop themselves spontaneously in each particular community or race, according to the particular circumstances which affect their operation, and of which the influence of other nations and races is only one, frequently not among the most important; and we find, that each particular race and nation passes through its regular course of progress, maturity, and decline, without appearing to exercise any permanent influence on the character and fortunes of the species. It would be impossible on an occasion like the present to enter, in much detail, upon a survey of this description, but it may not be wholly unprofitable to cast a rapid and hasty glance over the mere outline of this vast picture.

I. The history of civilization divides itself into three great branches, corresponding, in the main, with the three great divisions of the ancient continent; Europe, Asia, and Africa. The last of these sections is the one which formed the theatre of its first development. Scripture and the classical writers concur in attributing to the Ethiopians,—a people situated at the sources of the Nile and on the territory which forms the modern Abyssinia,—the precedence in the order of time over all other civilized nations. Between this people, and that which at the same time occupied the peninsula now called Hindostan, there was probably much communication, as appears from the similarity of their architectural monuments, and some other circumstances; but as the period when they both flourished lies beyond the domain of history, we have

no means of deciding with certainty which was a colony from the other. As far as the accounts carry us, the priority belongs to Ethiopia. The history of this nation is almost wholly concealed in the night of ages; and we know but little of it, excepting that it must have been in its day the seat of great power, wealth, and luxury, and the point from which they diffused themselves over all the neighboring regions. From this remote quarter, civilization descended the Nile into Egypt, and was carried over the Red Sea into Arabia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Babylon and Nineveh are represented in Scripture as colonies of Ethiopia. Phenicia, which included Tyre, and of course Carthage, which was a colony of the latter city, sprung from the same stock. In short, the whole North of Africa and South-west of Asia,—the whole vast extent of territory, which stretches from the Streights of Gibraltar to the Ganges,—was peopled by a family of kindred nations, of which Ethiopia was the parent, and Egypt the most prominent member.

Egypt is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable nations that have ever flourished, and has, indeed, lately been pronounced by a powerful British writer, decidedly the most remarkable of all. Her history, like that of Ethiopia, is nearly unknown in its details; but there is evidence enough remaining of the power, wealth and high civilization, which distinguished her at the period of her greatest prosperity. In proof of this, we need only mention the Pyramids, and the ruins of cities and temples, that cover the banks of the Nile:—monuments, that are so far from having been equalled or surpassed at any subsequent period, that we can even now hardly form an idea of the possibility of their construction. These magnificent ruins are, however, by no means the only records of the glory of Egypt. The text of Scripture, the works of the Greek and Roman writers, are filled with descriptions of her wonders, admiration of her wisdom, wealth and luxury, and terrors of her power. The height of prosperity which she had attained as a nation, is the best proof that we could have of the excellency of her political constitution; while it appears, from the paintings and utensils found among the ruins of her cities, that the practical arts of life were carried by her to nearly the same degree of perfection, as with us.

By the side of Egypt, and on the foreground of the same

historical picture, Babylon figures with hardly less magnificence. The Greek writers, particularly Herodotus, have exhausted their eloquence in describing her splendid architectural monuments; and the details he gives us are of so extraordinary a character, that they have been regarded by some writers as fabulous; although from the well-attested veracity of the Father of History, as to every point that came within his own knowledge, there is little doubt of their correctness. Egypt and the kindred nations around her, were, in short, the civilized world of that primeval day. There it was, that the generous and stirring spirits of the time, Pythagoras, Homer, Solon, Herodotus, Plato and the rest, made their noble journeys of intellectual and moral discovery, as ours now make them in England, France, Germany and Italy. The great law-giver of the Jews was prepared for his divine mission by a course of instruction in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. The colonies that gave the impulse to improvement in Greece,—the founders of Argos, Athens, Thebes and Delphi,—came from Egypt or her colonies, and for centuries afterwards their descendants constantly returned thither, as to the source and centre of civilization.

Such was the height to which improvement attained in Africa; and, it may serve to moderate the pride we are apt to feel in the supposed superiority of the white race, to which we belong, over every other, to recollect that the whole civilized world of this early period was inhabited by men of a color, which in this country we hardly venture to call by its proper name, in connexion with the human species; in short by blacks. Ethiopia and Egypt, India, Babylon and Nineveh, Tyre and Carthage, are all represented by the Greek writers as peopled in their time by men of this color. The Egyptians, in particular, are described by Herodotus as blacks with woolly hair.* Some modern writers have, it is true, attempted to dispute the positive assertion of Herodotus on this subject. It is well known that the Europeans,—unwilling to admit that a race whom they have injured so deeply as the Africans, are naturally their equals,—have undertaken to prove that they are an inferior variety of the species, and even to show, by certain points in their physical constitution, that they must be so. This degrading theory,—degrading, we mean, to its authors, and not

* Euterpe § CIV.

to the unfortunate race whom they thus attempt to reduce below themselves in the scale of humanity, in order to have some apology for torturing and oppressing them,—this degrading theory is of course ruined by the single fact, that the Egyptians, the predecessors, and as it were the masters in civilization of the Europeans, belonged to the African family; and in order to maintain the system, its partisans are compelled, and have really undertaken to make out, that Herodotus did not know black from white. Those who do not go quite this length, affirm that even if the mass of the nation were men of color, the ruling families, who possessed the power, wealth and wisdom of the country, must have been white; and this theory has been thought to receive some confirmation from certain paintings found among the Egyptian monuments, representing processions and other public meetings, and which include persons of different colors, black, red and white. This fact may be easily explained, by supposing that the paintings in question belong to the period of Egyptian history subsequent to the Persian Conquest, from which time forward the ruling families were undoubtedly white: and it could, of course, carry no weight in opposition to the highest contemporary authority.

We may add, that at this time there was no prejudice entertained by the Europeans against the color of the African race. The early Greeks appear, on the contrary,—as was natural enough, considering that the blacks had the advantage of them in power and civilization,—to have regarded the latter not merely as their equals, but as a superior variety of the species;—superior to themselves, not only in wisdom and virtue, but what may seem to be much more remarkable, in outward appearance. The Ethiopians, says Herodotus, excel all other nations in longevity, stature, and personal beauty.* Their excellent moral qualities are amply attested by Homer, who constantly speaks of them with the epithet *blameless*, and informs us repeatedly, that Jupiter, attended by all the Gods, was in the habit, out of regard to their extraordinary piety, of accepting an invitation which they annually gave him to a festival that lasted twelve days. When Achilles, in the first book of the Iliad, complains to his mother, the sea-goddess Thetis, of the insult he has received from

* Thalia, § CXIV.

Agamemnon, she gives as a reason for not reporting the matter at once to Jupiter, and demanding redress, that he, with the whole celestial synod in his train, was absent on his annual visit to the blameless Ethiopians, and was not expected back in less than twelve days.

‘ The Sire of Gods, and all the etherial train,
On the warm limits of the farthest main,
Now mix with mortals, nor disdain to grace
The feasts of Ethiopia’s blameless race.
Twelve days the powers indulge the genial rite,
Returning with the twelfth revolving light ;
Then will I mount the brazen dome, and move
The high tribunal of immortal Jove.’

The black prince Memnon, probably a king of Egypt, who served in the Trojan army at the siege of Troy, is uniformly spoken of by the Greek and Latin poets as a person of extraordinary beauty, and is qualified as the son of Aurora or the morning. There are, in short, no traces to be found of any prejudice against the color of the blacks like that which has grown up in modern times, and which is in fact much stronger in this country than in Europe. It is obviously the result of the relative condition of the two races. We hate and despise the blacks, because we have deeply and shamefully injured them. The prejudice against them proves not that they are naturally inferior to us, but that we, in our treatment of them, are inferior to ourselves. It forms, however,—as was correctly remarked by President Madison in one of his speeches in the late Virginia Convention,—the principal obstacle to the practical improvement of the condition of that portion of this unfortunate race which we have among us ; and it is in the hope of contributing, however slightly, to the removal of it, that we have indulged in this digression.

Such, however, is the brief outline of the first development of civilization of which we have any knowledge. It commenced in Africa soon after the deluge,—spread itself all over the neighboring regions, and continued to advance by a regular progress for about a thousand years, until it attained,—at the period assigned to the Trojan war, that is, about eleven or twelve hundred years before the Christian era,—the high state which we have now been describing. If the doctrine of a regular progress in the condition of humanity were true, the ad-

vances thus obtained would have naturally served as a point of departure for a new march towards a still higher degree of civilization. What in fact happened? Has Africa,—has the black race, continued to advance during the three thousand years that have elapsed since the period of the Trojan war, with as much rapidity as during the thousand that preceded it? The question would be sufficiently answered by the prejudice we now feel against the very color, shape and physical constitution of that ill-fated people. During the period alluded to, civilization has been constantly declining in Africa and her colonies, as regularly as it previously rose. Shortly after the time of their greatest power and splendor, Egypt, Babylon and all their dependencies excepting Carthage, were subjugated by the Persians,—then a hardy and warlike race of mountaineers. The sensation created at the time by this tremendous political revolution, appears to have resembled that which was occasioned in our own day by the progress and results of the late crisis in the affairs of Europe. We have still extant a lively contemporary expression of it in the writings of the Hebrew prophets, and many of our readers doubtless recollect how universally and how aptly the fourteenth chapter of Isaiah, which describes the fall of Babylon, was applied in our public religious ceremonies to that of Napoleon. So deep and lasting were the impressions produced by this catastrophe, that two of the most celebrated painters of our day,—one of whom we are proud to claim as our countryman,—have selected it as a subject for the pencil. Mr. Allston is now engaged on a picture intended to represent the wonderful events that occurred in the interior of the Palace at Babylon, on that memorable night, when Belshazzar held his last feast; and when the troops of Cyrus, after turning the course of the Tigris, passing in its bed under the walls of the city, and ascending the private stairs that conducted from the river to the royal apartments, burst upon the view of the assembled court in the character of the ministers of divine vengeance upon a corrupted people, and announced to the monarch that his kingdom was divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. This was about five hundred years before Christ. Two centuries later, these terrible invaders, already corrupted by power and prosperity, were first repulsed, and then subjugated by the Greeks, who, under Alexander, wrested from them all their African conquests, and extended their own dominions from Indus to

the sources of the Nile. Carthage still remained,—the sole surviving fragment of African prosperity ;—but this was soon swept away by the swelling inundation of the Roman power. The grand and gloomy figure of Hannibal closes, with appropriate dignity the long line of the successors of Nimrod, Ninus and Sesostris. From this time forward, the proper African race ceases to exercise any independent action in the affairs of the world. Their territory has been successively occupied, without resistance on their part, by the northern barbarians, the Arabs, the Turks, and every European nation that has chosen to invade it. By the effect of this series of revolutions, the wealth and population of these naturally fine and flourishing regions have been gradually wasted, until they have sunk into the state in which we see them at the present day.

II. The history of the African branch of civilization lends, therefore, but little confirmation to the theory of regular progress and complete perfectibility. Look now at the Asiatic,—that, we mean, which occurred in Asia independently of the influence of the African colonies, which, as we have remarked, overspread and civilized the South-western part of that continent. The scene of this development was laid in the central and South-eastern quarter, among a people whom we commonly denominate the Tartars, although that name does not seem to be in use among themselves. The details of its origin and progress are,—as in the case of Africa,—in a great measure unknown. The results are apparent in the vast and populous empires of Japan and China,—especially the latter, which is doubtless in many important particulars one of the most extraordinary communities that have ever flourished, and of which the history and institutions are far too little studied by the political inquirers of the Western world. Improvement appears to have commenced in this quarter somewhat later than in Africa, and to have advanced by a slower progress. China, which had previously consisted of a number of independent nations, constantly at war with each other, was consolidated into its present shape at about the period of the Christian era, and from that time forward continued to advance in power, wealth and civilization, for at least a thousand years. The creation of that immense empire did not however exhaust the activity of the Tartar race. On the contrary, their habits of daring and restless enterprise kept in constant alarm, not merely the central part of Asia, which they inhabited, but the

whole ancient continent,—we may say indeed the whole world. Fresh hordes, successively emigrating from this quarter, or urged forward by those who actually did so, subverted the vast fabric of the Roman Empire. Before this catastrophe was finally completed, their spirit of expansion took an opposite course, and under the direction of Gengis Khan and his immediate successors, poured itself out over the kindred nations of their own stock in the south-east of Asia, and crossing the Himalaya mountains, burst, like a tempest, on the beautiful and then unwarlike regions of Hindostan and Persia. Among the results of this last and most violent effort of the development of the Tartar race, were,—as we have reason to suppose,—the emigrations which led to the establishment on our own continent of the empires of Mexico and Peru.

A late British writer, Mr. Ranking, has undertaken to give in detail a history of these emigrations and their consequences; but without indulging in vain speculations, which belong rather to the domain of romance, we have ample ground for considering the principal fact as certain. The attack on Japan by a Tartar army at about this period, which is recorded by the native historians of that empire, proves that a portion of their tribes had moved in a north-easterly direction; and it is hardly probable that their course would have been checked by the trifling obstacle of a narrow arm of the ocean. They doubtless crossed the Straights of Behring, and advanced towards the South in search of a better climate, until they reached the equatorial regions, where they finally settled. The traditions of the Mexicans and Peruvians point, in fact, to the north-west, as the quarter from which their ancestors proceeded; while their manners, opinions and physical constitutions identify them fully with the great Tartar family.

Be that, however, as it may, and from whatever source we may suppose that the population of these empires proceeded, it is certain that civilization began to advance with great rapidity in Asia, soon after the opening of the Christian era, and continued in a state of progress for about twelve or fourteen hundred years. Asia was, in fact, the civilized world of this period, as Africa had been of the preceding one. The Roman empire had become the prey of the northern invaders, among whom the spirit of improvement had not yet begun to develop itself. All the more ancient seats of civilization had relapsed into barbarism, and a general night of rudeness and

ignorance overspread the whole West. In the meantime, the East was flourishing in the full enjoyment of the arts, the comforts, and the luxuries that belong to polished society. The family of kindred nations which inhabited it, were governed by political and social institutions, differing, in many points of form, from those which we consider wise and liberal; but, if we may judge by their stability, well accommodated to the genius and taste of the people over which they were established,—after all, the real test of the goodness of any government. Under the influence of these institutions, population increased with extraordinary rapidity, until it reached in China the astonishing height of more than three hundred millions. Wealth, the progress of which is chiefly dependent on the increase of population, accumulated in proportion, and the invention and cultivation of the elegant and useful arts followed in its train. The discovery of the art of printing, which was made by the Chinese, gave an impulse to literature; and books were multiplied to an extent hardly known as yet even in Modern Europe. Learning was the only passport to the political and civil departments of the public service. Poetry and polite literature became the ordinary occupation and favorite amusement of the youth of both sexes, as we learn from the novels and romances of the Chinese, in which the young men and women of the higher classes, when they meet together, instead of engaging in the sorts of amusement which are fashionable with us, commonly challenge each other to a trial of skill in making verses. While these flowers of fancy embellished the surface of society, the philosophy of practical life,—the richest fruit of civilization,—was maturing beneath it. Morality was founded on the solid basis of the natural affections, and sanctioned by the pure and sublime religion of Confucius, which was not yet superseded by the gross superstitions of foreign origin, that have since gained ground among the mass of the people. Respect for age and authority,—devotion to the female sex,—a graceful softness and polish of manners, were the general characteristics of society, and gave security and pleasure to the ordinary intercourse of life. Some departments of art and science were less cultivated. Painting, sculpture, and architecture were neglected in the general enthusiasm for poetry: and the great attention and importance that were attached to moral and political philosophy seem to have thrown into the shade the mechanical and physical

sciences, which made but little progress. But notwithstanding these and any other deductions that may properly be made, it can hardly be denied, that civilization had attained at this time, in China and the neighboring nations of Eastern Asia, nearly or quite as high a point of perfection, though under a somewhat different form, as it has ever reached in any part of the world. Such was the state of these countries when they were first visited by Marco Polo, Ferdinand Mendez Pinto, and others in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. The accounts of their power, magnificence and luxury, which were brought back by these enterprising pilgrims, appeared to our rude and ignorant ancestors like Arabian tales. Though fully confirmed by subsequent inquiries, they obtained for a long time but little credit, and their authors were even held up as patterns in the art of open and unblushing falsehood. 'Ferdinand Mendez Pinto,' says a character in one of the British comedies, to another whom he is charging with a habit of gross deception, 'Ferdinand Mendez Pinto was but a type of thee, thou liar of the first magnitude!'

Here then was another large section of our race,—another family of kindred nations, forming as it were a world by itself, which had risen to a very high point of civilization. If the theory of a regular progress in the condition of humanity were true, they too might naturally have been expected to make still farther advances in improvement, and to have communicated their methods to others until they had civilized the whole human race, and carried it with them to the acme of complete perfection. The result, however, has by no means corresponded with any such expectation. Although the prosperity of Asia, as it increased less rapidly, has also been somewhat more lasting than that of Africa, it has, nevertheless, been constantly declining since the period to which we have alluded. The spirit of expansion and development has ceased to exhibit itself in this quarter, and the vast central *plateau* of Tartary, which formerly sent forth swarms of conquering emigrants toward every point of the compass, is now nearly uninhabited. Three centuries ago the Tartars occupied Moscow. Now the Russians have their permanent military posts close upon the great wall. The wealth and magnificence of China, though still remarkable, have evidently sunk very much since the successive conquests by Gengis and his descendants, probably by the effect of some unfavorable changes

of constitution resulting from these events. Instead of extending her peculiar form of civilization throughout the world, this great empire has been compelled for two or three centuries past to act on the defensive, and to repel, as she best might, the vigorous inroads of the spirit of improvement developing itself under a different, and to her hostile shape, in the remote region of Europe, and thence throwing out its ramifications over the habitable globe. It hardly requires the exercise of a very strong prophetic power to foretell which party will ultimately gain the advantage in this struggle, or, even should their prosperity be wholly unaffected by any unfavorable foreign influence, to foresee, that the glories of Peking, Canton, and Jeddo are destined, comparatively at no very distant day, to share the same fate with those of Rome, Memphis and Babylon.

The history of Asia leads us, therefore, to the same conclusion in regard to the progress and limits of the improvement of society, with that of Africa. It only remains to notice the bearing upon this subject of the third great experiment, which is furnished us by the history of civilization in Ancient Europe.

III. The white, or as it is sometimes called Caucasian race, by which Europe has been peopled, is the one which we, who belong to it, have been in the habit of considering as essentially superior to every other. The illustrious naturalist, Linnæus, has classed it as a separate variety of the species, under the honorable title of *Homo sapiens Europæus*,—the wise European. It is here, therefore, if any where, that we should expect a confirmation of the theory of perfectibility, and it is fortunate for the elucidation of the subject, that as respects this part of it, we have in our possession all the facts necessary for forming an opinion. It is, however, as it happens, precisely in this quarter, that we find the strongest evidence of the visionary character of this system. Among the European nations of the old world, civilization passed through the natural course of progress, maturity, and decay, with equal regularity and greater rapidity than among the Asiatic or the African. The improvement of the white race commenced at once in several quarters, among the Jews, the Persians, and the Greeks, about the time when civilization had passed its maturity, and was going to decay among the Africans: that is, about one thousand years before Christ. The Jews were a

white colony, who emigrated into Palestine from the North-east, and after an intermediate residence of two or three centuries in Egypt, finally established themselves in the former country. Their name will be forever memorable in the history of the world, as that of the nation through which it has pleased Providence to instruct a large portion of mankind in the sublime truths of religion. Notwithstanding the prejudices against them, which were entertained by the Romans, their capital is declared by Pliny, to have been by far the most illustrious of the cities of the East. *Hierosolyma, longe clarissima urbium Orientis*.^{*} But their political importance does not correspond with the wide space they occupy in the domain of religious and moral philosophy. They were considerable, for a moment, under David and Solomon, but were almost immediately crushed by the still overwhelming greatness of the African nations, and never afterwards recovered their independence. It was, however, only seventy years after their subjugation, that the white race acquired, at the conquest of Babylon by the Persians, the ascendancy over the blacks, which they have ever since maintained. From this time forward, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans figured successively as the representatives of the whites, and as the leading powers of the civilized world of that period. The Persians were almost immediately corrupted by the arts and luxuries of their vanquished enemies, and ran very rapidly through their short and comparatively inglorious career, which commenced with the conquest of Babylon, and finished with the flight of Xerxes. The Greeks acquired during their prosperity a peculiar glory, by discovering the true principles of taste in the fine arts, and, at the same time, carrying the practice of them to complete perfection. They occupy in this department the place that belongs to the Jews in religion; and will forever excite the enthusiastic admiration of the lovers of poetry, painting, sculpture and architecture. But they, like the Jews, figured on a theatre too limited in extent to allow them to obtain a durable political importance; and the whole period of their prosperity, from the repulse of the Persians to the Roman invasion, falls within the compass of less than three centuries. It is accordingly among the Romans that we find the most complete development of civilization that took place in

^{*} Plin. Nat. Hist. V. 15.

ancient Europe, but even here its progress and decline were much more rapid than they had been in Africa or Asia. In less than eight hundred years from the foundation of the city, Rome attained her loftiest height of power under Augustus, and in less than five hundred more was completely over-run by the barbarians; leaving no other trace of her political greatness, but the miserable wreck that survived at Constantinople. The vigor and virtue that marked the earlier periods of this illustrious Republic,—the arts and luxury that attended its maturity,—the vices that precipitated, and the melancholy struggles that attended its fall, constitute the principal subjects of our youthful studies, and are too familiar to us to require any notice. Suffice it to say, that the history of the wise European,—or Caucasian,—the *homo sapiens Europæus*,—whether we view him in Judea, Persia, Greece or Rome, is no better fitted than that of his weaker brethren to encourage the belief in the theory of a regular and indefinite progress in the condition of society throughout the world.

Such is the brief outline of the whole series of experiments on the fortunes of nations, of which we have any account, and of which the record may be considered as entirely made up and closed. Within four or five centuries, a new development of civilization has commenced among the race to which we belong, on the same field which was the theatre of the former one, and is now in a state of progress on the ancient continent, from which it has more recently extended itself to this. No conclusions can of course be drawn with propriety from experiments that are still unfinished, and we must leave it to future generations to gather from the history of Modern Europe and her colonies, the political and moral lessons which it is fitted to teach. It is natural, however, for communities which are actually in a state of progress and expansion, to look with complacency on the present, and with brilliant anticipations on the future. Not having yet reached the limit of their own advancement, and not having it of course immediately before their eyes, they are tempted to flatter themselves that none exists, and that they are destined to furnish a splendid exception to the course of universal history. Such appears to have been, in fact, the historical origin of the theories upon this subject that grew up at the opening of the French Revolution, and to which we have alluded. The delusion, by the effect of which the individual believes that his case will form an excep-

tion to the general laws that regulate the fortunes of his kindred and kind, however common it may be, is of too gross a character to require refutation. But having in this way adopted the notion that civilization, after reaching the point which it has now attained in Christendom, could not possibly decline, some persons have sought and assigned certain positive reasons for this belief. It has been said, for example, that the art of printing must forever secure to us the knowledge, and of course the power and prosperity which we now possess. But those who urge this argument forget, that it is not the loss of the arts which occasions the decline of nations, but the decline of nations which occasions the loss of the arts. Subject the United States to a government like that of Turkey, and the art of printing would be extinct among us in fifty years. Establish in Turkey the political constitution of the United States, and within the same period the empire would be covered with booksellers' shops, and inundated with newspapers. The Chinese possess the art of printing as well as we;—nay, they possessed more than a thousand years ago the last of our improvements in that line, that of stereotype plates, which are the only types in use among them. Their system of characters is perhaps in theory more perfect than ours. But the art of printing, with all the perfection to which they have carried it, has not prevented them from declining in civilization, after they had reached their period of maturity. We are told again, that the superior correctness of our political principles, and the excellence of our forms of government, will secure us against the fate that has befallen our predecessors. But it should be kept in mind, that the real excellence of all political institutions lies in their conformity to the character and condition of the people; and that, if these undergo an unfavorable change, the very same forms, that were before elements of strength and prosperity, become the fatal sources of weakness and destruction. It is lastly affirmed, that we enjoy in the religion of the Gospel a singular distinction, which will secure us forever from the danger of political decline. But if the possession of Christianity, in the pure and perfect shape in which it was preached by Christ and his apostles, did not prevent the decay of civilization in Ancient Europe,—did not prevent the utter ruin, within half a century, of the city in which it had its origin, and, within three or four centuries, of the Roman empire by which it was adopted,—how can we expect, that it should be

with us a sure guarantee of unalterable worldly prosperity? The Divine Author of this religion, in fact, declared, that his kingdom was not of this world. However pride and patriotism may lead us to indulge in sanguine calculations of the prosperous and brilliant destinies that appear to be reserved for the communities to which we belong, it would be useless and puerile to pretend to disguise from ourselves and others, that they are still communities of men, that they are subject to the common law of humanity, and will pass with more or less rapidity through the same successive periods of development, maturity, and decline, that have made up the history of all the rest.

All experience, therefore, concurs with reason and religion in assuring us, that there are limits fixed by the physical and moral laws of our nature, beyond which improvement, whether in the case of individuals or communities, cannot be carried. Within the limits marked out by these laws, its possible progress may be said to be indefinite. This view of the condition of humanity will not, we trust, be considered as in any respect gloomy or discouraging. It leaves open, in fact, to the generous and patriotic citizen, a field of exertion as wide as the loftiest ambition needs to wish. Although analogy may perhaps suggest the sober reflection, that the long lapse of four thousand years, of which we possess the record, has probably exhausted almost all the possible combinations of circumstances, and that there is little reason to expect hereafter any better results than the best that have occurred already, we are yet at liberty, without elevating our hopes beyond the line of practicable improvement, to aim at greater attainments than those that have illustrated the most celebrated names of ancient and modern times. The young enthusiast may dream of an eloquence superior to that of Cicero or Burke,—sublimier strains of poetry than those of Homer or Milton,—a deeper philosophy than that of Aristotle or Bacon,—a purer virtue than that of Washington. The ardent patriot may hope and believe that his country, under the influence of wiser institutions and happier circumstances, may attain a height of civilization as much superior to any that has yet been reached in any other part of the world, as the present condition of Europe and the United States is to that of the degraded inhabitants of Southern Africa, or the aboriginal natives of our own continent. All this we may hope and aspire to for ourselves and our country, without aiming at attain-

ments beyond the limits of practicable improvement, as we have attempted to define it,—and if all this do not satisfy us, it must be owned, that our ambition is not very moderate. And if the view, here presented, cuts off the visionary prospect of complete perfection,—the belief of which could only lead to delusion and practical abuse,—it concurs, on the other hand, with the conclusions of reason, the suggestions of feeling and the promises of Scripture, in confirming our assurance of a pure and happy immortality hereafter.

We have thus endeavored to explain, though in an imperfect and summary way, the nature of the laws that regulate the progress and determine the limits of the improvement of society. It is, as we remarked at the outset, of high practical importance,—particularly in a community which, like ours, is actually in a state of rapid progress,—that the prevalent views on this subject should be of a correct and rational character. Loose and exaggerated expectations naturally generate fantastic schemes, which can only end in disappointment, and inflated forms of expression, which expose us to the ridicule of foreigners; while they also tend, on the other hand, by the effect of reaction, to discourage the efforts that would otherwise be made in a judicious and practical way. There is the less reason for us in this country to indulge in delusive visions of ideal and impossible improvement, inasmuch as we have before us, in the prospects that are really held out by the actual situation of the United States, as ample a field for useful exertion and flattering hope, as the most active and enthusiastic patriot needs to wish.

We shall conclude this article by pointing out some of the principal circumstances in our situation, which render it probable that, within the limits assigned by the moral and physical laws of our nature, and the uniform experience of the world, we are destined to make as rapid a progress, and to attain as high a point of civilization, as the most favored communities of ancient and modern times.

1. The first ground of high, and at the same time perfectly rational hope on this subject, is founded on the great recent improvements in the physical sciences, and their application to the arts. These constitute, as we have already remarked, the peculiar distinction, and only incontestible title of superiority that belongs to the modern world; and they are probably destined to exercise a most favorable influence on its future con-

dition, especially in this country. The immediate effect of such improvements is to increase the productiveness of labor, and of course to render its products proportionally cheap and abundant. In this way, the material comforts of life are rendered accessible to a much larger number of persons than before. The increased facility for obtaining the material comforts of life carries with it additional opportunities and facilities for intellectual and moral culture. Now the principle of the most important change for the better which we can imagine in the present condition of society, lies precisely in the extension, to a much larger number of persons, of the facilities for the material enjoyments of life, and for moral and intellectual culture, which have hitherto belonged to comparatively few individuals. The most astonishing results have already been realized in this way in some departments, particularly that of communicating information and instruction by the process of reading. To say precisely how much the productiveness of the labor formerly employed in copying manuscripts has been increased by the invention of the press, would be difficult, but to state it at a million times would probably be a very low calculation. Libraries, that would formerly have been considered treasures fit only for princes, are now within the reach of individuals of moderate fortunes, and of village societies. The more recent improvements in some of the other applications of labor are hardly less remarkable. The invention of the power loom and steam engine, with the supplementary machinery which comes in aid of them, has done nearly or quite as much to increase the productiveness of the labor employed in the manufacture of most of the objects necessary to the material comforts of life, as that of the press did for the dissemination of knowledge through the medium of books. Its practical result ought to, and under circumstances otherwise favorable, must in the end be to render the use of these objects much more general than it has hitherto been in any community. These results are not yet fully realized either abroad or among ourselves, and there is perhaps no point towards which the efforts of benevolent individuals or associations can be directed with better effect, than that of enabling the poorer classes to obtain all the advantages in the way of food, clothing, and comfortable habitations, which the great discoveries alluded to are capable of affording them. Having noticed, at the beginning of this article, the wild speculations of Mr. Owen on the general question of the improvement of society, it is per-

haps but justice to him to remark here, that his views in regard to the extension of the advantages derivable from the modern improvements in the arts to the poorer classes of people, are of a far more judicious and practical character, and may be consulted with advantage by those who take an interest in the subject.

2. Another strong ground for a high, and at the same time rational hope of the rapid advancement of civilization in this country, is founded in the free and popular character of our political institutions. In many parts of the world, which are equally with us, or perhaps to a greater extent, in possession of the last and most valuable improvements in physical science, —the political constitution of society is such, that the whole power and wealth of the community, with the means of material enjoyment and intellectual culture which they carry with them, are concentrated in the hands of a very few persons, and that the mass of the people have no real assurance of retaining and enjoying the fruits of their labor. Under these circumstances, it is obviously of no importance to them, whether the labor, of which they are not to enjoy the fruits, is more or less productive. Their only effort is to work as little as they can, and the advantages resulting from improvements in science, and their application to the arts, are hardly felt. With us, on the contrary, where every individual is completely protected in the enjoyment of the fruits of his labor, every augmentation of their amount operates as an equal addition to the wealth and happiness of the mass of the people, and they will of course seize with avidity the opportunity afforded by any increase in the productiveness of labor for realizing such an addition. The advantages resulting from improvements in science will of course be diffused very generally, and with great rapidity, and the condition of the body of the people must assume in the end an entirely different aspect, as respects the comforts of life and the state of intellectual and moral culture, from that which it wears under institutions of a different character. On the other hand, the same genial influence of freedom, which diffuses security, comfort and intelligence through the body of the people, opens to the few gifted and lofty spirits who choose to enter on it, the field of honorable distinction, in every department of public and private life, upon much more inviting terms than can possibly be offered in other differently constituted communities, and thus encourages the progress of civilization in both its great constituent branches, one

of which consists in the well-being and intelligence of the people at large, and the other in the high attainments of the smaller number of superior minds who are fitted, by original powers and peculiar advantages of education, to give a direction to the thoughts and labors of the rest.

While therefore we retain in their purity our present political institutions, we are morally certain of continuing to make a regular and rapid progress in improvement; and should they be destined to a long term of existence, we have every reason to hope and expect, that we shall attain under their influence a higher degree of civilization than has yet been reached in any other country. Every thing depends, therefore, on the durability of these institutions; and while the most sanguine patriots will readily admit that they are still of too recent construction to be regarded as completely out of danger, it is nevertheless cheering to reflect, that we have all the securities for their stability and permanence, which the nature of the case would easily admit.

We are sure, in the first place, that our institutions are not the mere forms of free government, which are often united with the substance of tyranny; but rest on foundations which are laid broad and deep in the state of the community. When the diffusion of property and intellectual and moral culture keeps pace with that of political rights, as is the case with us, it is certain that the government has all the stability which belongs to its character, and can only be shaken by changes in the condition of the people, or by its own essential impracticability.

Again: we are in a great degree secured by our favorable geographical position and extent of territory, from the accidental danger of foreign invasion, and sudden domestic convulsions, which have proved fatal to the peace and prosperity of so many free states. The vast ocean, which intervenes between us and the ancient continent, has always been and will continue to be a perpetual wall of defence against hostile inroads from abroad; while the large extent of our territory, which has sometimes been regarded as one of our dangers, furnishes the best protection we could possibly have against the occurrence of violent political convulsions at home. When the body politic is bounded by the walls of a single city or by the borders of a narrow territory, the slightest accidental circumstance,—a single burst of popular feeling,—the restless ambition of a single aspiring citizen, may overturn the government. But

when the action proceeds, as with us, on a theatre extending over a whole vast continent, and is conducted by ten or twelve millions of independent actors, the partial and local effect of sudden movements and single characters is lost in the general result, which is determined entirely by the operation of general causes. The great elemental principles of *TIME* and *SPACE* are therefore, under Providence, allied with us against all our enemies, foreign and domestic. Our case will be tried in the court of experience, on its merits, whatever they may be ; and if there be any danger of failure, it can only arise from the utter impracticability of a purely democratic constitution on the scale on which we have attempted it, although tried under every accidental advantage, and with the aid of important improvements in political science, which had never been applied to practice before.

On this vital question,—the essential practicability of our institutions,—it becomes us of course to speak with the serious hope that leads to active and persevering exertion, rather than with the vain confidence that inspires an idle security ; but we have yet a right to point, with modest assurance, to the favorable experience of two centuries, during which our institutions have been gradually and constantly developing themselves, and acquiring new degrees of consistency and vigor, as an encouraging guarantee of their future destiny. We know, at the same time, that the success of the grand experiment we are making in the science of government, will depend entirely on the vigor and fidelity with which each successive generation perform their part in guarding and transmitting to posterity the invaluable treasure which they have received from their own predecessors. Every effort we make for the diffusion of knowledge, and for the extension of the influence of morality and Religion, besides the immediate advantages which it is intended and fitted to produce to ourselves and our contemporaries, brightens the prospects of the country, and will improve the condition of our children and their descendants for centuries to come. From such efforts, the blessing of Providence is never withheld ; and should they be generally made and perseveringly continued, so as to give a character to the moral aspect of the people, the success of our experiment is certain ; and we shall pass through a course of national existence, as long, as brilliant and as fortunate as the transitory nature of human affairs will permit.